

Abraham Lincoln
SKEVINGTON





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“ABRAHAM LINCOLN”

AN ORATION BY
THE REV. SAMUEL J. SKEVINGTON
DELIVERED ON THE OCCASION OF
The Lincoln Centennial Celebration



Y. M. C. A. HALL, NYACK - ON - HUDSON
FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 12th, 1909



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Issued by a Few Citizens of Nyack-on-Hudson who
are Lovers of the Memory of Abraham Lincoln

JOURNAL OFFICE
1909

ABRAHAM LINCOLN.

“There was a man sent from God whose name was”
Abraham Lincoln.

On the 12th day of the second month of the year 1809, the birth year of a peculiarly brilliant galaxy of great lights, among whom were Oliver Wendell Holmes, Edgar Allan Poe and Alfred Tennyson, stars of the first magnitudes in the firmament of poetry; Chopin and Mendelssohn, master workmen in the charmed world of music; Charles Darwin, the great pioneer of modern science; William Ewart Gladstone, the Grand Old Man of British statesmanship, and Samuel Francis Smith, the humble author of the immortal national hymn, “My Country 'Tis of Thee”; just one hundred years ago to-day was born the noblest and grandest of them all, the Great American, the incarnation of the spirit of the Declaration of Independence, the embodiment of the new Democracy, the preserver of the Union, the emancipator of the negro slave, the first of the hallowed trinity of America’s presidential martyrs. The “Immortals” among the sons of men are strangely few, but though no star came down to twinkle its prophetic homage over the rude log-cabin, and no angel-song floated on the wintry air, and none of the wise men in the east so much as dreamed that a kingly man was likely to be born in the rugged and un-

courtly West, the whole world recognizes to-day that he who was born of Nancy Hanks Lincoln, in the lonely clearing of the Kentucky forests, was destined by high heaven to be enshrined in the topmost circle of the temple of humanity, among the sublimest of the sons of men.

It remains for coming generations to trace the stream of heredity through the humble lines of his known ancestry to the yet hidden springs of his towering grandeur, but for the present he stands before us a man of the soil, a mysterious enigma like unto Melchizedek, to be explained by nothing that we know, either of his blood or his training. He is the one great man and mystery and miracle of the Nineteenth Century.

His mother—his “angel-mother,” as he called her—to whom, like every other man who ever becomes worth while, he owed more than to any other human being, was a woman of marked gentleness, intelligence and piety. Though she succumbed to the rigors and hardships of her pioneer life before the boy had spanned his first decade, she had already impressed deep upon his sensitive spirit the love of truth and justice, the integrity of heart, and the reverence for God and things divine, that remained with him, conspicuous characteristics, to the end of his days. Some years later, when his honest and humble father married Sarah Bush Johnson, the son of Nancy Hanks was blessed by the helpful sympathy and ministering love of a second mother.

His school life was of the scantiest; he was the graduate of no scholastic institution, but all his days he was a brilliant

student in the university of hard work and hard knocks. But he loved to read, and what is worth more, and alas! much more rare, he loved to think; he thought more than he read, and though his books were few, his study of them was so thorough that it more than compensated for the scantiness of his library resources. He had extraordinary qualities of mind. From a boy he could never tolerate the hearing of that which he could not understand, and accepted every "dark saying" as a challenge to be fought out to a clear understanding. Once on the trail of an idea, there was no rest of mind until it was not only fairly caught, but completely mastered, until, in his own words, he had "bounded it north and bounded it south and bounded it east and bounded it west."

His was that vision of mind that pierced through the externals, the surface matters, and gripped the foundation facts and eternal principles, and then his was the power to express them in words so simple and phrases so clear that, like Him who spake as never man spake, "the common people heard him gladly," and understood.

He may have lacked some things the schools could have given, but Nature had endowed him with the highest order of an uncommon commodity that no school could supply—the grace of common sense. His was "the wisdom without learning" to such a degree that Jeff Davis declared he had "more common sense than any man in America," and Lowell called him "the incarnation of the common sense of the people."

In moral character he was unmarred, clean and pure, and uncontaminated by a single vice. There are no dark and dismal passages in his life over which the mantle of charity need be thrown to hide any ugly unseemliness. He could have said, with Spurgeon, the sainted preacher, "You may write my life across the sky. I have nothing to conceal." Living in a ruggedly honest but roughly uncultured civilization, among a people given to much drinking and loud swearing, with a strange naziritism he held himself aloof from both, never so much as tasting intoxicating liquor and never soiling his lips with profane speech.

At the age of 19, after a childhood and youth cheerless enough, he emerged from the shadows of the Kentucky forests, as the pilot of his father's prairie schooner, transporting the family to the new home in Indiana, giving little promise of becoming and doing what the oncoming years were to unfold of glorious character and heroic deed.

Soon after having helped his father to comfortably settle in the still newer home in Macon County, Illinois, to which the Lincolns had emigrated two years after their Indiana settlement, Abraham, now having reached the years of manhood, announced his intention of leaving home in quest of his own independent fortune. Going to New Salem, he made an inauspicious beginning by buying a business on notes, failing, and retiring, with nothing for his trouble but a little experience and a considerable debt, from which it took him some time to extricate himself, but which he paid to the last cent.

Then he turned his hand to land surveying, becoming deputy county surveyor, and also held the office of post-master, carrying the weekly mail in his hat, and delivering it as he chanced to meet those to whom the letters might be addressed. In connection with his administration of this unimportant federal office an incident is chronicled which is most significant as an illustration of his scrupulous honesty. During his incumbency the post office at New Salem was discontinued, and by some oversight the balance of cash on hand, which amounted to sixteen or eighteen dollars, was not called for. Then having taken up the study of law, he removed to Springfield, where he tasted some of the bitterest poverty of his life, being compelled again and again to borrow from his friends that he might have the bare necessities of life. But when, one fine day, a government official unexpectedly called for that long-forgotten post office balance, the young law student calmly walked over to his boarding house and came back with an old blue sock, in which were found the identical silver and copper coins that had been paid him for postage, and footing up cent for cent to the exact amount of the draft. In the face of penniless poverty and the humiliating necessity of borrowing, he had never touched the trust funds in his care, even though seemingly forgotten by the Government for several years. No wonder they called him "Honest Abe."

In the meantime he was training his mind and studying law, and while he never became one of the great lights of the legal fraternity, he did become a successful jury lawyer,

as honest and faithful to truth and justice in his professional as he ever was in his private life.

In 1834 he was elected to the State Legislature, trudging on foot the hundred miles to and from Vandalia, which was then the capital of Illinois; and after having served four terms and declining further re-election, in 1846 he was sent to the National Congress. Declining the offer of the Governorship of the Territory of Oregon, which would, in all seeming probability, have changed the whole current of his life, and not impossibly of the whole nation, Lincoln dropped out of politics and applied himself to the practise of the law. But in 1854 the slumbering giant was aroused. The time for which a far-seeing Providence had planned and prepared him was now at hand. The iniquitous Dred Scott decision of Judge Taney, the Missouri Compromise, and the "squatter sovereignty" policy championed and advocated by Senator Douglas, of Lincoln's own State; the excitement attending the ever increasing business of the so-called "Underground Railway," the imperious demands of the slave-holding South for the protection and expansion of what *they* called the "divine institution," the impassioned attacks of the New England abolitionists on what *they* called the "sum of all villainies," and the gathering clouds of the irrepressible conflict that could no longer be doubted or delayed, all this formed a condition that needed and called Abraham Lincoln to the mission of his life.

In the greatest intellectual duel on the stage of our political history since Webster and Hayne crossed their Damas-

cus blades in the U. S. Senate, Lincoln fought Douglas on the fundamental issue of human freedom, taking higher and bolder ground than had ever yet been assumed by any American statesman.

It was now that he made his immortal utterance, "A house divided against itself cannot stand. I believe the Government cannot endure permanently half slave and half free."

That brave and heroic stand cost him a seat among the Senators of his time, but it gave him a throne among the immortals of all time.

Lacking in the personal charms and graces of the orator, but with able and impressive speech, of equal beauty and simplicity, blood earnestness and force of logic, he stood and plead for the life of his country and the liberty of her four million swarthy slaves, as Demosthenes plead for Athens and Cicero for Rome and Burke for India, and while Douglas won the election, the verdict of the nation awarded the moral and intellectual victory to Lincoln, and the aroused people rallied to his standard, and crowned his brow with the proudest laurel that any free man ever wore. They recognized him as the man of the hour, as we now recognize him as the man of the century and one of the few men of the ages, the man "sent from God."

The American principle was on trial for its life. The fate of the great Republic, dedicated from its birth by the immortal Declaration of Independence, and the heroic blood of the Revolutionary fathers, to the proposition of human

freedom and self-government, standing for the dignity of manhood and the sovereignty of the soul, was trembling in the balance.

In 1860 the issue of the political campaign was centered on what the Continental Congress declared to be a self-evident truth, "that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." On this rock of eternal truth the *might* of *some* men and the *rights* of *all* men were predestined from all eternity to come together with a clash and a crash. Aristocracy and Democracy, the spirit of the past and the spirit of the future, were preparing to cross swords in a mortal combat, fighting for the mastery, not only of this land of the West, but of the whole world. It was not only a national, but a human crisis.

In that hour, the people, the people nearest the soil, the common people, turned away from the idol of the party, W. H. Seward, the ripe scholar, eminent lawyer, wise statesman and experienced diplomat, one of the most able and distinguished among the Governors of this great Empire State, and chose for their leader and standard bearer the untried giant of the West, electing Abraham Lincoln as the sixteenth President of the United States.

To many this choice seemed to cast serious doubt on the wisdom of popular government, on the ability of the people to select and elect their leaders with sagacity and safety. Placing in the White House the child of the log-cabin, tra-

versing the whole social life of the nation and bringing from the obscurest obscurity of the bottom to the dazzling glare of the top this plain man of the people was surely a bold and daring move. But the people had faith in him, as he had boundless faith in them, and time and events abundantly proved that this time, at least, "Vox Populi" was also "Vox Dei."

But it was no very exhilarating condition of affairs that greeted the new President when he quietly entered the capital city *during the night* to escape the murderous plots against his life.

He was hated by the slave-holders of the South because he opposed the rights of slavery in new territory, repudiated by the Abolitionists of the North because he recognized the legal rights of existing slavery under the Constitution, and distrusted by the leaders of his own party because he was to them too much of an unknown quantity to have won their confidence. When, on the fourth of March, 1861, he stood forth to take over the reins of government, he found the Confederacy an established fact, with civil and military equipment, the United States treasury empty, the army scattered and impotent, the federal forts and arsenals seized, treason stalking defiant and unrebuked in Washington, the South determined to secede, and the North paralyzed with doubts and fears.

It was a day of supreme tension, but standing, robed in the simplicity and sublimity of his conscious mission, calm and fearless amid the frenzy of passion and the dread of

tragedy, Abraham Lincoln took the oath of office, and read his first inaugural message, preaching with great force and feeling, weighty argument and winsome pleading, the "Gospel of the Union," appealing to the "better angels" of the nation to face the problems calmly and solve the difficulties peacefully.

And as he stands there, in the initial hour of his presidential career, let us note the appearance of the man. Six feet four inches in height, slender, but sinewy and of great muscular strength, he was a man of very marked physique; but it was his face, "half Roman and half Indian" in its cast of features, that stamped itself on the memory as one never to be forgotten. A massive head, wide brow, strong nose, full lips and most remarkable dark grayish brown eyes, deep set, with a far-away look, and an inexpressible sadness when in repose, but capable of sparkling mirth when his abounding sense of humor wooed them from their melancholy depths, and of such gentleness that they were declared to be "the kindest eyes ever placed in human head." It was a wonderful face, seamed with care and steeped in sadness, yea, the saddest face of his race, but a face so full of soul that we can easily understand the expression of the woman who came from his presence saying, "They told me that he was an ugly looking man, but he is the handsomest man I ever saw in my life." His handsome heart transfigured his unhandsome face.

But he soon had enough to bear on that great sympathetic heart to seam and shadow a less expressive counte-

nance than his, for with the firing of the first shot on Fort Sumter, on the 12th of April, 1861, the country was plunged into all the horrors of the Civil War. Barring his few weeks of military service in 1832 at the time of the Black Hawk Indian war, the new presidential Commander-in-Chief of the Army and Navy was not like Washington, Jackson, Harrison and Taylor before him, and Grant, Hayes, Garfield, Harrison, McKinley and Roosevelt after him, a man of war, more or less trained and experienced in the arts of armed conflict; he was pre-eminently a man of peace, but nevertheless his was the master-spirit and master hand throughout the longest, bloodiest and most Titanic struggle of our history.

What Washington did for the founding of the Union, Lincoln did for the preservation of the Union. The one broke the thirteen colonies away from the tyranny of England, established them in the independence of the "United States", and weaved their symbolic red and white stripes into one flag; the other set himself against the disruption of that Union, and gave mind and heart, love and life to the keeping of every star in the blue of that flag.

The Northern side of the Civil War (in which these venerable patriots bore their honorable and heroic part) was fought in the defense of the unity and integrity of the nation.

Of this conflict Lincoln was the very center, and to it he contributed what only a Lincoln could.

To the cause of the Union he gave the inspiration of an

unbounded faith in the rightness of its foundation principle, and of an unfaltering hope that even in the darkest of the many dark days never despaired that ultimately right would prove its might, and that God would give the victory to those who fought on the divine side of the question of human liberty.

To the cause of the Union he consecrated his genius of leadership, interpreting the issue of the conflict to the intelligence of the people, appealing for support to the heart of the people, and winning for the beloved cause the good will of the people.

In the service of the Union, this champion of freedom, a stranger to the love of power for power's sake, with whom presidential honors were forgotten in presidential sorrows, developed into the greatest and most successful executive and ruler this or any other free people ever had.

In the service of the Union he manifested greater political astuteness than Thurlow Weed, greater diplomatic skill and judgment than William H. Seward, and greater oratorical powers and resources than Edward Everett.

It was the *cause of the Union* that inspired his thought and clothed his words with their sublimest dignity and beauty and power, as in his first inaugural when with such patience and pathos he plead with the passionate South, and in his second inaugural, the briefest but noblest and loftiest of all presidential inaugurals, when his great, burdened soul breathed out over the nation, and the world, the sweetly solemn fervor of his piety, and the mournfully tender pathos of

his patriotism, and at Gettysburg, on the blood-consecrated battlefield, when he rose to an exaltation of utterance unequalled in the history of American eloquence save by Patrick Henry at Williamsburg and Wendell Phillips at Faneuil Hall, and always it was the *cause of the Union* that inspired, and to the *cause of the Union* that he offered the sublimest effluence of his heart and mind and lip.

It was *to serve and save the Union*, not to please the radical abolitionist, or gratify his own conviction of the injustice of negro slavery, that he issued the emancipation proclamation which liberated an enslaved race and broke the back of the Rebellion.

And it was while wrestling with God for *the cause of the Union* that he was led into the richest depths of his religious experience. His state papers are full of a noble faith in God; indeed, some of them read like passages from the old prophets, but when he first became President his religious convictions were dull and hazy, and his religious life was weak and uncertain, but the burdens of the imperiled and suffering Union that well nigh crushed him to the earth, drove him again and again to his knees before God with the consciousness of the utter insufficiency of human wisdom and human power to cope with his problems and carry his heart-breaking load. It was not through the tall and stately gateway of reasoning, but through the lowly portals of service and self-sacrifice, service and self-sacrifice for the *cause of the Union*, that he was led from the low lands of troublous

doubt to the high lands of triumphant faith and rejoicing experience.

He was the touchstone of the Union, around *him* a million men fought the bloodiest warfare of the century; around *him* Union and disunion grappled in a deadly struggle; around *him* four million swarthy slaves dropped their fetters and arose in the liberty and dignity of their common humanity.

And after four years of hourly martyrdom, he emerged at last, the towering giant of the age, triumphantly vindicated by a re-election at the polls, victoriously vindicated by the final success of the conquering Grant and the boys in blue, divinely vindicated by the coming of peace and the abiding unity and integrity of the Union, and 'round the world and up into the very heavens flashed the glad, glorious message that the Star Spangled Banner in triumph still waved, o'er the land of the free and the home of the brave.

The war was over. The Rebellion was crushed. The Union was saved. The negro was free. The tattered but triumphant Stars and Stripes of Old Glory were flying over a reunited people; and peace, an honorable and magnanimous peace was spreading its white wings over the battle-scarred land, and the many shadowed homes of both the blue and the gray.

And out of it all, towering above the giants of the camp, and the giants of the council, was the "man sent from God whose name" was Abraham Lincoln.

"With malice towards none, with charity for all," the

great-souled President, full of gentleness and goodness, enshrining in his God-touched heart "the greatness of real goodness, and the goodness of real greatness," the man who could say, "I never knowingly planted a thorn in any human heart," the man whose unfathomable depths of sympathy made him the great burden bearer of his people, the American man of sorrows, the man who walked through the streets of Richmond, the captured capital of the foe, not jubilant and vain-glorious with the sense of Northern victory, but with a bleeding heart suffering with the sufferings of the South; the man who could say, "I have not suffered *for* the South, I have suffered *with* the South"; that man now turned his wide open arms and heart to welcome the South back to the old home like a brother beloved, and stooped to cheer and caress and lift the suffering and sorrowing brother as he sat wrapped in tattered and blood-bespattered gray, disconsolate amid the smoldering ashes of his homes and hopes, and out of those ashes, into which, wounded to death, it had been flung, the expiring serpent of human slavery darted its poisoned fangs, and in the writhing of its death agonies, it wounded and slew the gentlest, kindest, noblest, greatest and sublimest leader and lover the American people ever had.

It was not the South, O! lay it not to the charge of the American citizen soldiers who fought in gray, lay it not over against the door of the chivalry of Virginia or the knight-hood of her confederate states, lay not that monstrous sin on the heart of the people; that was not the deed of defeated

patriotism; it was the culminating crime of expiring tyranny; it was not the spirit of the South, it was the spirit of slavery that slew the noble Lincoln; it was the feudal spirit of the Middle Ages, expiring on the free soil of this blood-bought Republic, which in its dying hour gathered and spent its last breath in one climactic act of vengeance against the man who was the embodiment of the free spirit of the coming ages and whom high heaven had commissioned to banish slavery from this land of freedom.

It was on the night of the 14th of April, 1865, that the passion-possessed and deluded Booth sent the fatal bullet crashing on its terrible mission of death and disaster, and though the light of the morning of another day dawned over the stricken nation before his departure, he for whom the many millions mourned never saw it, for without regaining consciousness *here* he opened his eyes *there* in the beauteous land of eternal light and everlasting peace at twenty-two minutes past seven on the morning of the fifteenth.

Ah! and who shall say that, with all its horror and its mystery, in some slight degree akin to that of Calvary, his death was not the fitting crown of his life! Two hundred thousand heroes, in answer to his call, had laid down their lives to defend that flag and purge it of its stain, and when safe and secure, free and pure, it was at last unfurled over a re-united country, and the great task was done, he bowed and lay himself down beside the humblest of the boys in blue, crowning his four years of living martyrdom with the sacrifice of his life on the altar of his country.

Eclipsing the joy of returning peace, this fateful cloud cast a dark shadow over the whole land. The nation was bathed in tears, and draped in mourning, while the grief of the emancipated slaves was sublimely pathetic, and throughout the world the note of sympathy and sorrow found fullness of expression. The great President was shot. Abraham Lincoln was dead.

Paying our homage to his memory, let us not deify the man and rob him of his humanity, for Lincoln was not only very much *a man*, but very, very human, and it is the very humanness of the man that is the basis of the eternal glory of the man. It is as a man, a man of the people, a man of the common people, that the memory of his name, and the fame of his life, and the influence of his words and works come to us as one of the richest legacies of our national past. But none the less, like Moses, the Hebrew, and Paul, the Jew, and Columbus, the Genoese, and Luther, the German, and Cromwell, the Briton, and Washington, the first American, Abraham Lincoln was God's man for a chosen task, the only man of the century who could have stood, like a modern Atlas, supporting the columns of the Union, not on his shoulders, but on his heart.

Aside from the saving of the Union, the supreme achievement of President Lincoln, and what he himself called "the great event of the Nineteenth Century," was the emancipation of the American negro. For years he had felt the injustice and inconsistency of human slavery in a republic founded on human freedom, and had long prophesied that it

was doomed to die. As early as 1838 in the Legislature of Illinois he had gone on record as its implacable foe, and it was his attitude toward slavery that made him President. But he was not a radical; he was constitutionally conservative. He recognized that under the Constitution slavery had certain legal rights, and he condemned the inflammatory methods of the Abolitionists. He would have much preferred a gradual and compensated emancipation, as was actually wrought out under his leadership in the District of Columbia in 1862, and as England had done some years before throughout her vast colonial empire, but it was not to be; the sword had been lifted by the hand of slavery, and it was the sword that was to fall back into the heart of slavery.

Convinced of its wisdom and necessity by the vicissitudes of the war and the checkered fortunes of the Union, he issued his Proclamation of Emancipation on the first of January, 1863, adding a worthy companion to the other two superlative American documents, the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States, and from that day no man of whatsoever race or color has ever breathed the breath of a slave beneath the ample folds of the American flag, and Abraham Lincoln has taken his place among the sons of men as the Great Emancipator.

He is not only the Great American, but the great *man* of the Nineteenth Century; he is not only a national figure, but a *world* hero, a masterpiece of humanity; and not only has his own proud people haloed him in glory, but all races of

free men unite to do him honor and accord him a conspicuous place among the immortals.

And while art has built its monuments and painted its canvasses, and literature has woven its crown of immortelles to enshrine him for our own and future times, and while to-day countless hearts echo the prayer of the negro, "God Bless Marse Linkum," we may not forget that the challenge of his memory is to something higher and nobler than the carving of stone, the mixing of colors, the making of fine sentences, or even the offering of pious petitions; it is a challenge to the loftiest patriotism and the noblest brotherhood, a love of God and Country, and a love of fellow-man that shall rise over and above the littleness of selfishness, and pour out on the altar of God and Country and our common Humanity the divinest libation of our hearts and lives.

As in his immortal speech on the battlefield of Gettysburg, he called, so in his hallowed memory to-day he calls, that we, the living, shall dedicate and consecrate ourselves to the yet unfinished tasks remaining before us, highly resolving that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people and for the people, shall not perish from the earth. THAT is the meaning and the challenge of Abraham Lincoln to the manhood, the patriotism of our day and generation, and well may we pray—

"Lord God of hosts, be with us yet,
Lest we forget—lest we forget"—

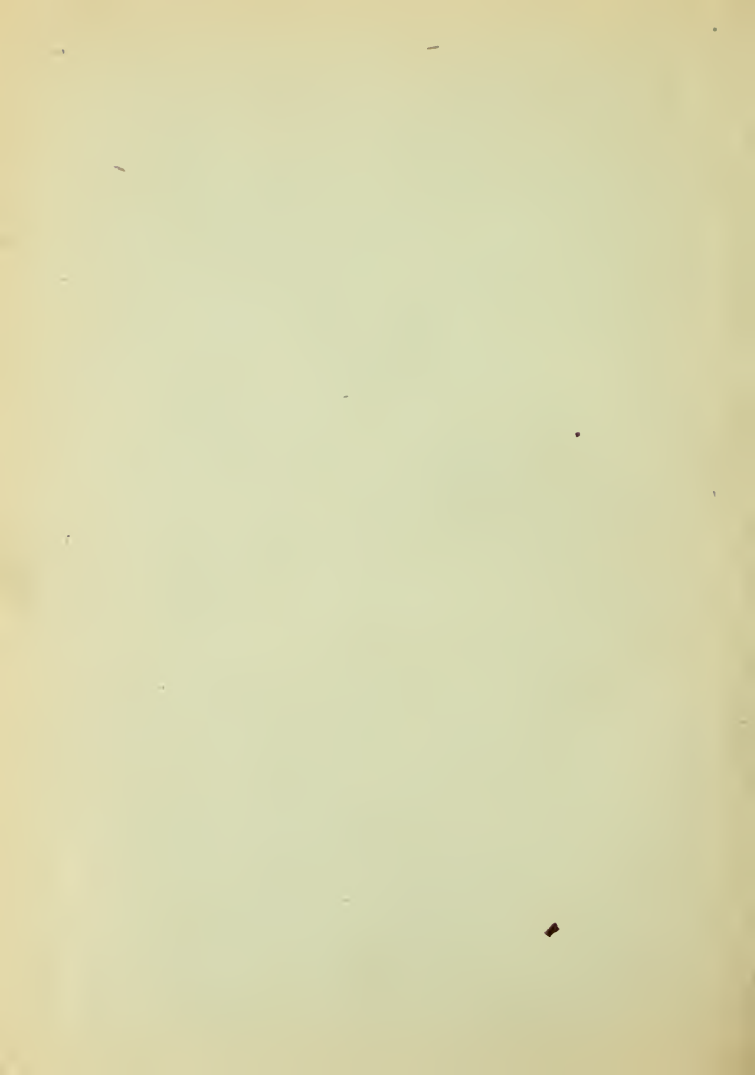
and sing with devout spirits and patriotic hearts around the altar of our God, and the shrine of our country:

“Our fathers’ God, to Thee,
Author of Liberty,

To Thee we sing;
Long may our land be bright
With freedom’s holy light;
Protect us by Thy might,
Great God, our King.







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